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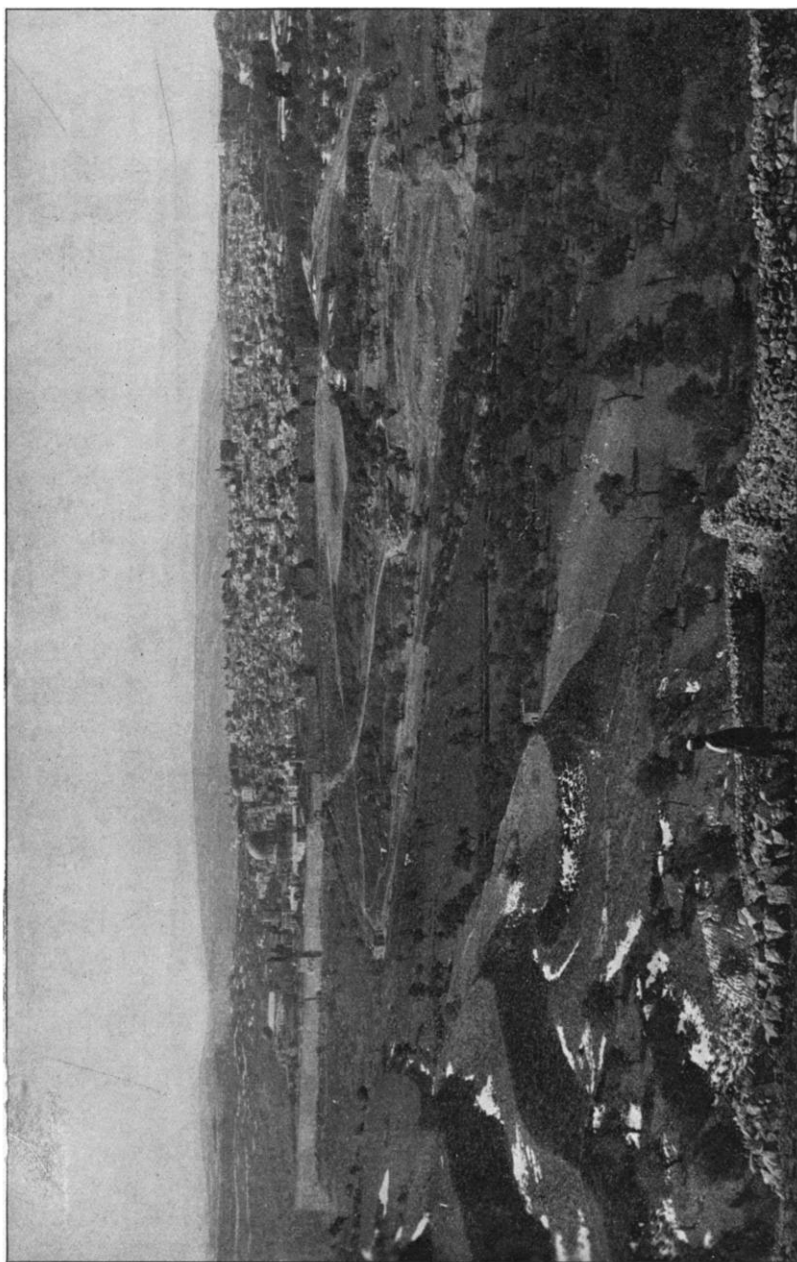
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JESUS' USE OF HYPERBOLE.

THE ever-increasing regard for the teaching of Jesus which marks the present period of Bible study and which brings us nearer to the original Christianity—the gospel of Christ—than has been true of any previous century except the first, has made it supremely important that we should know how to interpret his teaching correctly. Since we have come to recognize that his conception of God is the one for us to hold, his ideal of life is the one for us to live by, his knowledge of himself is the truth for us to accept, and his view of the future is the one which brings joy and peace, we are more concerned than formerly to ascertain the meaning of his words. Nor can we be too thankful for the blessing and guidance which we have in the gospels that record for us the life and teaching of Jesus. They come down to us, under the guiding hand of God, from the knowledge, trust, and devotion of the first generation of Christians, who found in these memorabilia of their Master the supreme source of their religious beliefs, the inspiration of their faith and hope, and the never-failing guide of their conduct.

The sayings of Jesus were so simple and plain that those who heard him were able to understand him. He sought to be intelligible in his teaching, and he was so. That is, he left earnest hearers in no doubt as to God's love and care for them, and as to what the will of God required of them. The gospel in its essential points was meant for a universal message which would make necessary



JERUSALEM, SEEN FROM MOUNT SCOPUS.

truth known to all who sought it. And so today the untrained reader of the English Bible can find in the gospels the spiritual assurance, the strength, and the wisdom which he needs for the determination of his life. If this were not so, the gospel of Christ would be the exclusive possession of the educated few, like intellectual systems of theology, philosophy, and ethics, rather than a religion for all mankind. The critical error of the Roman Catholic church, past and present, is the idea that the Bible is intelligible only to the clergy, and that therefore the untrained masses must learn Christianity from the priests and not from the Scriptures. It was the Protestant Reformation which restored the Bible to the hands of the people, and placed upon them once more the privilege and the responsibility of getting their religion at first hand from the New Testament. It is the crowning glory of the gospel that *no* man need be without its guidance, comfort, and inspiration.

But while this is true, we are confronted with the fact that some of Jesus' teachings are interpreted in different and in contradictory ways. If the essential gospel ideas can be misunderstood, there are yet many of his sayings which are capable of various meanings. One particular problem is whether in certain teachings Jesus wished his words to be taken literally, as precepts or statutes. Some are insisting that Jesus is to be so understood when he says: "Resist not him that is evil: but whosoever smiteth thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39). But this utterance is only one of a class. Shall we then interpret Matt. 6:3, 4 as forbidding all organized charity, Matt. 6:6 as forbidding all public prayer, and Matt. 6:25 as forbidding all plans and provisions for the future? Nothing but absurdity results from an attempt to take these teachings literally. Christianity so interpreted makes unreasonable demands upon men. And, therefore, not a few have risen up to condemn Christianity as an impractical dream of an ancient idealist who meant well, but was unable to furnish to men any practical guide to conduct.

The difficulty arises from a failure to take account of the style in which Jesus gave his teaching. He definitely chose a literary style in which to express himself. That style was distinctly popular, and in the nature of the case oriental. Too often Jesus' teaching has been handled as though it were a systematic, scientific treatise on theology and ethics, whose expressions were fittingly to be subjected to laboratory test, each element to be exactly determined by finely graduated measuring-rod or delicate weighing-scales; or as a new volume of legislation, every word and clause of which was to be applied with complete literalness, forming a rigid system of minutely regulated conduct. No greater mistake could be made, and the results so obtained must be hopelessly incorrect and perverse. Microscopic analysis is a radically wrong process to be applied to Jesus' utterances. For he chose to deal with the masses, and his ideas were expressed in language which they could hear and consider.

As he taught the Galilean multitudes, in their synagogues, upon the highways, along the seashore, or upon the hillsides, Jesus put his religious truths and ethical principles into concrete popular sayings, contrasting his ideal of life in many simple ways with the conventional notions and practices of his day, and illustrating his teaching from the ordinary avocations, experiences, and environment of his hearers. Figurative language was natural to him as an oriental, and by no other style of expression could he have held the attention of his oriental audiences. Similes, metaphors, illustrations, parables, hyperbolic expressions, were constantly upon his lips. So that we must ever be on our guard against interpreting literally what he has spoken figuratively.

In his use of hyperbole Jesus is sometimes misunderstood. The reason for this probably is that a hyperbolic utterance has the appearance on the surface of being an exact, literal statement. To take it otherwise seems to be a reduction of its full meaning, a dilution of its proper strength. The plea is that, if some of Jesus' emphatic utterances are to be interpreted figuratively, and so divested of

*HIS
HYPERBOLICAL
SAYINGS*

their peculiar force, what is to protect all of his teaching from a similar reduction? One must reply, a true historical method of interpretation. For it is just as certain that all of Jesus' language is not hyperbolic, as that some of it is so. The problem is to distinguish the hyperbolic sayings from the rest. What criterion can be found for this differentiation?

Hyperbole is a rhetorical device for producing emphasis; it is a figure of speech in which one says more than is meant, or states unconditionally what must in use be conditioned, for the purpose of a strong effect. We have no difficulty with Jesus' saying, "If any man cometh unto me, and *hateth* not his own father and mother and wife and children, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26); obviously he means to impress the idea that we are to seek *first* the kingdom of God, and no one can suppose him to mean that he requires hatred instead of love. So when he says, "If thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from thee" (Matt. 5:29), no one supposes that a physical act is advised, inasmuch as the removal of an eye would not accomplish the suppression of impure desires.

It becomes evident, in this way, that when an act enjoined by Christ is inconsistent with his plain teaching, or is in itself unreasonable and ineffective, one should look to

**TESTS OF
HYPERBOLE** see whether his language is to be understood figuratively. Perhaps in that way a good sense is to be obtained. By this process we arrive at the idea that in Matt. 6:3, 4, 6, Jesus was inculcating a *principle* for acts of religious worship; he did not mean to forbid organized charity or public prayer, but he did mean to teach that these things must never be done ostentatiously or with selfish motives, to gain the praise of men for superior generosity or piety. Similarly, in Matt. 6:25 he does not wish to condemn prudence, and an ultimate goal in life; but he does wish to establish the *principle* that one is to live for spiritual ends, with a trust in God for needful things which will forestall that anxiety for the future which men have who think they must take care of themselves, without a heavenly Father to love and provide for them.

And so we come back to the famous non-resistance passage. Did Jesus intend that his words should be taken literally, so *MEANING OF THE NON-RESISTANCE TEACHING* that the evil-doer should have an entirely free course in his abuse of Christians? Did he mean it as a *rule* of conduct that his followers were never to stand for the rights of men or to rebuke wickedness? See his teaching as to how a disciple is to deal with another disciple who sinned against him, Matt. 18:15-17. No one has yet been able to show that the welfare of mankind and the progress of the kingdom would be advanced by the literal non-resistance method. Civilization has risen to its present height, not by allowing violent and wicked men to have their own way, but by building up a system of law which shall suppress violence and wickedness, which shall secure to men protection from evil, abuse, and extortion, and shall guarantee to them the rights of man. It is irrational to interpret Matt. 5:39 literally.

But what, then, is Jesus' meaning? The saying is hyperbolic, worded so as to produce a profound and lasting impression. The general statement is contained in the words, "Resist not him that is evil;" while the verses which follow (39b-42) present four concrete illustrations of such conduct. The literary form is throughout a hyperbole. In this striking figurative language Jesus is inculcating a *principle* of conduct, namely, that men are not to act from motives of hatred and revenge; on the contrary, they are to be unselfish, loving, and forgiving. They are to overcome evil with good, they are to heap coals of fire upon their enemies' head, they are to be longsuffering and patient, ready to endure personal abuse without seeking retaliation, ready to yield rather than to stand for their rights, ready to serve others as far as possible, and ready to share with others, in a reasonable degree, their goods.

This principle is to control, even to determine, all Christian conduct. It does not do away with civil law, and institutions which seek to protect the rights of men; it does not even forbid war when civilization can be advanced in no other way (who will say that the rebellion, with its emancipation of the slaves,

was unjustifiable on Christian grounds?). For the reign of righteousness, justice, and truth must prevail, and Christian men must make it prevail. What this teaching of *THE PRINCIPLE OF SELF-SACRIFICE, LOVE, AND FORGIVENESS* Jesus does do is to provide that in our work for the welfare of men we shall never be actuated by selfish motives, but shall have in view the higher good of all, leaving behind that primitive stage when men exacted an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

So understood, Matt. 5:39-42 is in accord with Jesus' other teaching, and presents a reasonable principle of human conduct. The saying was interpreted in a common-sense manner by the first Christians; why cannot as much be done today? The more Jesus' teaching is studied, the more it will be seen that he is inculcating the great religious and ethical principles of life, not giving a new legalism to bind men to a harder yoke of statutory servitude. Life by principle is the essence of the gospel. Jesus gave the principles, and in the application of these principles to their lives men are to use that intelligence which is bestowed upon them as a part of their human equipment. Among the principles of the kingdom which Jesus has established, that principle is certainly not the least which provides that our conduct is to be governed alone by motives of self-sacrifice, love, and forgiveness.